

Thursday, June 7, 12
9:53 AM

Why K Caved

By Thursday, Oct. 24—the day after the blockade was instituted—K decided that his effort had failed, and that he would have to remove the missiles. Despite his threats of defying “piracy” he didn’t want to challenge the blockade. And evidently Kennedy’s willingness to risk armed conflict with the SU on the high seas increased the credibility in K’s eyes that he would attack the missiles if Khrushchev did not remove them. That would call for a response from the Soviets that would raise even more risk of all-out war as an eventuality than a confrontation in the Caribbean. K had not entered into the project with a desire to encounter such risks.

His hope as of Thursday morning in Moscow was to withdraw with as little loss of face as possible, preferably with something to show for the effort. Just why he continued to press his forces in Cuba to continue the installation of the missiles on a crash basis is not completely clear. (I haven’t seen that addressed in the scholarly literature, or in revelations from the SU). Presumably it was to improve the terms of the eventual “bargain,” by increasing the risk to the US of attacking the missiles and making Kennedy more anxious to see them removed without having to attack them.

A danger he was running by doing that was that it would predictably increase US military pressure to attack the missiles before they all became operational. And since that would likely be followed by invasion—after all, he had sent the missiles and other equipment precisely to forestall an invasion that he thought otherwise almost certain—he might have triggered the very event he feared. The crash effort on the missile sites could make that even more likely, and bring it sooner.

But if Kennedy himself was not actually anxious to carry out this attack and invasion at this time (as evidently he wasn’t, despite his urgent preparations for the contingency) he might, the greater its risks, pay the price of a serious pledge not to invade Cuba or allow further covert attacks from the US. And there were “private” indications from the Kennedys that he might pay more than that.

✓ The morning after the president’s speech, RFK had sent word to Georgi Bolshakov by two separate channels that his brother was open to removing the NATO missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the missiles in Cuba. This message was held up that day from getting to Moscow by the military intelligence (GRU) chief in DC; it’s not clear just when, if ever, it got to Khrushchev. But RFK gave the same message to Dobrynin in a private meeting Thursday night, according to Dobrynin. It was confirmed by JFK, Dobrynin says, in a call between the brothers during that meeting.¹

✓ So K dictated a message to Kennedy, in the presence of the Presidium and with their suggestions, proposing that the crisis be resolved by a no-invasion pledge from the

US and the removal of "the weapons you call offensive" from both Cuba and Turkey. But this message was not sent Friday. Before it was sent, alarming indications came from a variety of sources, but in particular from Castro, that an invasion was imminent, possibly within the next twenty-four hours or the next day. In face of that, K dictated—again in presence of the Presidium—a longer message indicating that a pledge of no-invasion would be enough: no mention of Turkey. That took many hours to code, travel and be decoded; it arrived in DC in sections Friday evening.

It was read happily by the Kennedys and much of the ExComm, who went to bed that night with relief. (Not so by the JCS, presumably, who were anxious to invade; a no-invasion pledge would have been anathema to them in any case, worst of all as a resolution of this crisis, which they saw as the best justification, and readiness, for an invasion they would ever see). But by Saturday morning in Moscow, Khrushchev had come to doubt the immediate imminence of the invasion and decided to try for a better deal. With the agreement of the Presidium, he brought the earlier-composed message proposing a trade with the Turkish missiles up to date and sent that.ⁱⁱ

[Reaction in the ExComm; JFK response; final JFK message; meeting to instruct RFK; RFK meeting with Dobrynin; expectations after that; (was RFK's ultimatum a bluff, or not? What do ExComm members believe that JFK would have done on Sunday or Monday, when the ultimatum expired? What do I conclude? What did K have to gain by rejecting the ultimatum—for a day? Why didn't he? Instead...contrary to all expectation (or adequate subsequent explanation) he accepted it: losing the crisis (and ultimately his job) as a result, and essentially ending pressure on Berlin. Why?]

Outline:

Why did K "cave"—agree to remove his missiles on the basis of a public pledge that the US would not invade (given UN inspection of the removal: which was never forthcoming)—exactly when he did? Why did he, on Sunday morning (DC time) press his proposal as urgently as he did?

given
24/48 hr
deadline
--not delaying to bargain further, twelve hours or more ; e.g., asking a direct response to his proposal for a Cuba-Turkey trade, which JFK's latest message on Saturday had simply ignored;

--sending the message by public radio, not waiting for coding and decoding by official channels;

--beginning the dismantling immediately, by first light in Cuba Sunday morning (even before the message was sent)

--not taking time to consult with or even inform Castro before the offer was sent (and the dismantling begun) (enraging Castro, and long hurting their relations).

No current account adequately answers these questions. The existing inferences as to why he caved at all—accepting a deal less good for him than his latest proposal—don't really address or explain the timing or urgency of his accommodation with JFK's Saturday message, which had simply ignored his own most recent and more demanding offer.

✓
WMO
The initial inferences drawn were that he had simply given up on achieving his more favorable terms: "lost his nerve," as Acheson put it later. It was a victory simply for Kennedy's firmness throughout that week, evidenced not only in his public and private statements but in the blockade (even though only sporadically and minimally enforced) and the urgent preparations for invasion. The lesson drawn: "Take a firm stand, prepare to back it up, and the Soviets will back down."

1
Dals. cable
✓
Then seven years later, RFK's posthumous memoir of the crisis, "Thirteen Days," revealed that Saturday night, RFK had conveyed to Khrushchev for his brother through Dobrynin what amounted to an ultimatum—the missiles must begin to be removed within forty-eight hours or the US would remove them by attack, and Khrushchev's acceptance of this was needed by the next day—and what amounted to a private deal—if the missiles were removed from Cuba, the missiles in Turkey would be withdrawn in four or five months, unless the Soviets revealed this explicit but secret understanding. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. revealed more details in his 1978 book "Robert Kennedy."

Both hawks and doves could draw conclusions from this revelation, depending on which part they chose to emphasize: new or reinforced "lessons." The hawks could

+ also

infer that it was the ultimatum that forced Khrushchev's hand, a confirmation of the effectiveness of "firmness" and military threats. Others found that the real lesson, after all, was the effectiveness of negotiation and compromise. A number of former members of the ExComm said in a joint column in *Time* in 1982 that it was this secret concession to Khrushchev that had led to a swift resolution of the crisis. They acknowledged that their own silence about this had permitted a false lesson about "crisis management" to persist for a generation: that it was simply toughness and firmness and credible threats, not concessions, that had led to the victory. Since then, it has been widely assumed that this secret offer was critical to the ending of the confrontation.

But that's almost surely untrue. The secrecy of the deal—RFK rejected a proposal by Dobrynin the next day that the oral understanding be confirmed in writing, even though it was to remain secret—meant that it offered Khrushchev virtually nothing, either domestically or diplomatically, to soften the humiliation of his retreat. He couldn't even take credit for achieving their removal to his own Presidium let alone ~~say~~, to the Chinese. The promise—even though it was meticulously carried out by the Americans—probably had no effect at all on Khrushchev's decision.

On the other hand, the ultimatum that has been focused on subsequently to "Thirteen Days" allowed at least another day, perhaps two, for more bargaining. His Saturday morning proposal of a public trade of the missiles had been encouraged by private communications from JFK that it was acceptable to him. (It was really, unknown to the rest of the ExComm, JFK's proposal!)

Even 24 hours—the time "requested" by RFK for a decision, though the hard deadline was 48—allowed time for Khrushchev to stand on or reiterate his own latest demand for a public deal, an explicit, symmetric agreement to withdraw medium-range missiles from the neighborhood of each other's borders. He didn't have to commit himself to that; and even if he did, he could retreat from it with no more embarrassment than his actual acceptance of retreat on Sunday. If Kennedy accepted that, it would mean a major diplomatic victory for Khrushchev, instead of the defeat he did accept on Sunday.

Why didn't he take time to make, or renew, that proposal? What did he have to lose? Probably Kennedy would have accepted it,ⁱⁱⁱ if his own public or private proposals had been rejected, or simply not answered, within twelve to twenty-four hours: *and if Castro had not shot down another reconnaissance plane*. The White House tapes show Kennedy, virtually alone, arguing for the acceptance of this deal—in Khrushchev's Saturday letter, but really suggested privately by JFK himself—most of the day as a "fair deal."

K couldn't know that, with any high confidence. Still, why not try, again? Because, I conclude, he did know several things that the Americans did not.

First: he *couldn't* stop Castro from ordering his antiaircraft gunners to fire at low-level American reconnaissance planes. They would certainly be flying the next day, perhaps at first light. Probably, as the Cuban gunners got more practice, one or more of these planes would be shot down. (*Castro on the*)

K didn't really have to be told what the American response to that would be. At the least, it would be to attack the AAA site that had shot the plane, if it could be identified; more probably to attack all the AAA sites and the SAM sites. Perhaps more.

He must even have wondered why something like this hadn't happened already, as he had feared when the Cubans insisted on firing and especially when he learned of the downing of the U-2. Indeed, virtually all of the ExComm recommended one of these responses Saturday, to be carried out either that very night or the next morning. Though JFK had promised such a reaction days earlier if a plane were shot down, he now overruled his advisors. He said he wanted to give the Soviets more time to respond to his latest proposal. But recon would be sent the next day, with fighter cover, and another shoot-down would lead to immediate retaliation.

As I say, Khrushchev didn't need to be told that. But he *was* told it, by the president's brother Saturday night, in terms more specific and far-reaching than have ever been reported. In my interview with him in 1964 for my crisis study, Robert Kennedy told me details of his discussion with Ambassador Dobrynin that night that went beyond what he described in his posthumous memoir five years later.

quote here

He told me he said to Dobrynin that the Soviets "had drawn first blood" with the downing of the U-2 and the death of its pilot, and that was a very serious event, it had changed the situation. Things were speeding up, they were moving toward being out of control.

"We were going to have to continue to send recon planes, we would be flying low-level reconnaissance, and if one more was shot down, we would immediately attack all of the SAMs and the antiaircraft. We would probably destroy all the missiles at the same time, and an invasion would probably follow."

He went on, he said, to tell Dobrynin that because of the shootdown, and their persistence in working on the missiles in the face of demands to cease construction, the situation couldn't be tolerated any longer. Even if there were no further shooting at our planes:

"I said either they now had to start removing the missile sites, *now*, or we would remove them. We would attack and destroy them. And that would almost surely be followed shortly by invasion."

Having in mind Bud Southard's suspicion that Khrushchev had been given an ultimatum that night, I asked Bobby: "Did you give him a deadline?"

He said, "Yes. Forty-eight hours."

I drew a deep breath. Monday night. Southard had been right.

Given what he'd said minutes before, I said: "But it could all start earlier, if they shot down another plane?"

"Yes."

I wanted to be clear on this. I said, "So there were *two* separate threats, or warnings. They had just two days to start removing the missiles or we would attack. That's if our planes weren't shot at, or shot down, any more. But if we lost another plane, the attack would start immediately, any time before that."

Bobby said, "That's right."

What Bobby said in the memoir that came out (after his death) five years later was consistent with this, but less specific about what was threatened for another shoot-down. He said that he had said to Dobrynin:

"In the last few hours we had learned that one of our reconnaissance planes flying over Cuba had been fired upon and that one our U-2s had been shot down and the pilot killed. That for us was a most serious turn of events.

"President Kennedy did not want a military conflict. He had done everything possible to avoid a military engagement with Cuba and with the Soviet Union, but now they had forced our hand. Because of the deception of the Soviet Union, our photographic reconnaissance planes would have to continue fly over Cuba, and if the Cubans or Soviets shot at these planes, then we would have to shoot back. This would inevitably lead to further incidents and to escalation of the conflict, the implications of which were very grave indeed." (Thirteen Days, NY. 1969, p. 107)

"Shoot back": that phrase doesn't convey the stark, deterrent weight of the warning that Bobby had described to me in 1964 (which he was very precise and explicit about), even though in 1969 he went on to say that further Cuban or Soviet shooting at US planes would "inevitably" lead to very grave "escalation." No doubt that's why the fact that this was a distinguishable, separate warning from his dead-lined ultimatum (which in traditional diplomatic fashion, he had told Dobrynin was "not an ultimatum") has never registered in the minds of scholars or commentators who have drawn on his memoir (or the official accounts, released later, in his report to Rusk on his conversation or Dobrynin's report to Khrushchev).

There is another divergence in his published memoir from what he told me in 1964. With respect to principal threat, he said in *Thirteen Days*: "We had to have a commitment by tomorrow that those bases would be removed. I was not giving them an ultimatum but a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them....Time was running out. We had only a few more hours—we needed an answer immediately from the soviet Union. I said we must have it the next day."

When he returned to the White House, "the President was not optimistic, nor was I. He ordered twenty-four troop-carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserve to active duty. They would be necessary for an invasion. He had not abandoned hope, but what hope there was now rested with Khrushchev's revising his course within the next few hours.^{iv} It was a hope, not an expectation. The expectation was a military confrontation by Tuesday and possibly tomorrow..."

[*Thirteen Days*, pp. 108-09; dots in original, apparently not indicating an ellision.]

JFK to
JCS
(mission
+ 7 days)

Tuesday for the attack corresponds to the 48 hours Bobby mentioned to me (which would have expired Monday night). "Possibly tomorrow"? That would mean, given what he had just told Dobrynin, in case of AA attack on our recon planes.

Bobby had not said anything to me about requiring "an answer" by "the next day," or twenty-four hours. When the memoir came out I read this as a contradiction to the forty-eight hours he had clearly said to me, but later accounts, reflecting the reports to Rusk and Khrushchev, distinguish between when an "answer" was demanded and when an attack was threatened to occur, which was not Sunday-- unless planes were shot at-- but Tuesday.

quote

6/10/12

as (K. L. L.)

Here's where matters stood by Saturday night/Sunday morning in Moscow:

--The US was sure to fly recon planes on Sunday, probably at first light. Certainly low-level flights and perhaps, again, U-2s.

(In fact, after the shooting of the U-2 Saturday, JFK had cancelled further U-2 flights: "until we had destroyed the SAMs." At first light Sunday, low-level flights were accompanied by fighter-bomber escort with orders to shoot).

--Castro's gunners had been ordered to fire at them. With increased experience and accuracy, they would probably down one or more planes. (Castro said later that his gunners, who had never fired at a live target before, were getting closer during the day Saturday, and he was certain they would have destroyed a plane on Sunday).

--Given loss of a plane—and probably at the onset of more shooting—the US would at the least attack AA positions, and probably the SAMs, possibly the missiles. The

latter possibility would have been strengthened by Bobby's warning, when that came in to him, but it would have been obvious even before that.

He could assume (and he would have been right) that JFK shared these presumptions.

But Khrushchev knew that otherwise his understanding of the immediate situation and what was shortly to follow diverged from Kennedy's. He knew certain things that—he knew—Kennedy did not. He hadn't told the Americans, and on Saturday night there wasn't time to remedy that.

After hearing Dobrynin's report of his Saturday night warning and ultimatum from RFK, Khrushchev could infer that JFK probably thought it unlikely that his planes would be shot at on Sunday, expecting RFK's strong warning to be effective in deterring Khrushchev from allowing that to happen. Therefore—even if he wanted to give Khrushchev time to respond to the 24/48-hour ultimatum—he wouldn't hesitate to send the recon planes over.

Certainly the warning—delivered to Dobrynin for Khrushchev, not simply to be passed on to Castro—indicated that Americans assumed that Khrushchev had strong control both of the Soviet-controlled SAMs and of Castro's orders to his forces. And so they did assume. Not one member of the ExComm ever suggested otherwise. (At most they distinguished between Castro's control of his "impulsive" Cuban gunners and Moscow's control of Soviet ~~control.~~)

SAMs

But Khrushchev knew that neither American assumption was true. He had, under these circumstances, virtually *no* control over Castro's orders to his gunners, or their behavior. And *he had not ordered the SAM to fire*. Moreover, he had no real idea how that had come about. Was his commander in Cuba following Castro's orders or urging? "Who is he working for?" he asked his Defense Minister. Even three days later, on October 30, he said in a letter to Castro, "You shot down the plane on Saturday" and reproached him as having been "incorrect."

Whatever had happened, he was not in control of his own forces in Cuba. He had no reason to be confident (whatever orders were sent in the wake of the shooting) that another SAM wouldn't be fired again at a U-2 (and he didn't know there would be no U-2 on Sunday). What did that say about the reliability of the missiles not being fired—without orders from Moscow, or even against orders--under attack?

What he did know was that the recon planes would fly Sunday—within hours of Dobrynin's talk with Bobby—and that they would be shot possibly, possibly some destroyed. This would lead to a full-scale attack on the defenses, and possibly the missiles, followed by an invasion. Full-scale pre-invasion bombardment, and massing of shipping offshore, might begin not Tuesday morning but Monday or even Sunday.

by NSA and not, following NSA

This much I had learned in my study in 1964. A number of bits of intelligence (some wrongly interpreted, but leading to a correct conclusion) had indicated to me what was not guessed by Bobby, the President or any other member of the ExComm in 1962: that Khrushchev had not ordered the U-2 shot down, and that Castro was defying him on the AA. That put Bobby's warning (as distinct from his ultimatum: neither known clearly by the ExComm at the time) in a new light. (I reached these conclusions after my one talk with Bobby; he had indicated strongly there would not be another, so I couldn't discuss them with him). It gave me a strong answer to one of the two questions that has always hung over discussion of the crisis: Why did Khrushchev fold so suddenly Sunday morning?

He knew that otherwise Soviet troops manning the SAMs, along with Cuban anti-aircraft gunners and very possibly the Soviets at his MRBM sites with their missiles, would be attacked Sunday morning or afternoon, with invasion likely to happen. This would occur as the result of events *he could not control*: except by forestalling them with an announcement Sunday morning (DC time) that he was accepting JFK's latest proposal and was already dismantling the missiles.

[how this differed from the usual interpretations, then and after Bobby's memoir in 1969 and the general understanding as late as 1982 and 1987: what became known and what did not during that interval, and how that affected understanding.]

But thirty years after the crisis, disclosures from the Soviet side revealed for the first time several other things that Khrushchev knew Saturday night which (he knew) Kennedy did not.

He had deployed tactical nuclear warheads with his dual-capability cruised missiles and intermediate-range bombers to Cuba. With nuclear warheads, over a hundred of them.

In his initial orders to the field commanders, he had authorized them to fire these weapons at an invading force on their own initiative. He had rescinded that delegation, in writing, the day of the president's speech, but (he may or may not have realized this) the actual official expectations were left ambiguous by his Defense Minister Malinovsky.

In any case, his military men knew well that commanders under attack generally assumed they could use all means at their disposal to protect their troops, or achieve a mission. (As I was informed in 1960 by the major at Kunsan commanding twelve nuclear-armed F-100s.) Several said thirty years later that they could not have been sure that the local troops or their commanders would not fire those weapons under attack, no matter what their formal orders were: especially if communications with Moscow (or local command in Havana) were cut off, as was quite likely under attack.

Both the cruise missiles and bombers were suited precisely for nuclear attack on an invading fleet. Even a few of them could have destroyed that force in the water or on the beaches: a hundred thousand or more American troops killed, many ships sunk.

This nuclear response would not necessarily, or even probably, wait for invading troops to hit the beaches or proceed inland. There were bound to be days of heavy air assault and offshore naval bombardment before that, with the Soviet troops manning the weapons under heavy attack (and the Cuban antiaircraft weapons nearby furiously firing, as on Saturday: which had been a significant inducement for the Soviet SAM commander at the Banes site to fire, even lacking the required orders from the Soviet commander in Cuba). Their targets would be within range: US Navy ships massing for the attack, the biggest armada and target for nuclear attack since Normandy (pre-Hiroshima).

6-11-12

Finally, Khrushchev knew that he had sent forty-two thousand Soviet troops to Cuba. Again, he'd done everything possible to conceal that from the Americans, not only in transit but inside Cuba. They'd stayed below decks, packed in enduring intolerable heat, throughout the voyage, offloaded at night and were wearing civilian clothes (a little carelessly, almost exactly the same tourist clothes). And the cover had succeeded only too well; Americans were planning for an invasion under the impression, from all-source intelligence, that they would encounter only some eight to ten thousand Soviets, most of them "technicians" there as trainers for the new equipment or agricultural advisors, not combat units equipped with tactical nuclear weapons.

The troops were there in part to guard the missiles and the tactical nuclear weapons; and the tactical nuclear weapons, in particular, were there to help them "defend themselves." Khrushchev and the Soviet military leaders had taken it for granted that if they were sending Soviet combat units to defend Cuba from American invasion, they would not deny them the weapons they needed to "defend themselves" from the invasion force and the American units. This was the same logic that led to the deployment of thousands of tactical nuclear weapons accompanying American units in Europe.

In both cases, on both sides, the logic had the defect that use of these weapons—against an adversary heavily armed with comparable weapons—would result not in the "defense" of the troops using them but in their total annihilation, along with the allies they were supposedly protecting. This defect was rather amazingly absent from the considerations that led to the deployments, either in the Soviet Union and Cuba or the US and the European NATO nations.

Yet it wouldn't prevent the deployments from being a powerful deterrent to rational decision-makers considering an invasion in the face of such weapons. The all-too-credible threat would be that they would be used by those being attacked, *not* as a

rational act of self-protection but as a reflex of standing orders, or a panicky response under attack, perhaps an unthinking, suicidal expression of desperation—or “courage, self-sacrifice”—under extreme stress or desire for revenge.

The existence of these weapons on a prospective battlefield would deter an adversary because a “crazy” use of them under attack was credible even if higher commanders would have wanted to prevent it. That is, this would be true *if and only if the adversary knew they were present, with the troops*.

And in this case, Khrushchev knew that the Americans knew of neither the troops nor the weapons. He had taken pains that they shouldn’t find out, and he hadn’t told them. And on Saturday night, it was too late to tell.

It was clear that within hours Cuban AA would be firing at American planes, and quite possibly Soviet SAMs would be too. Within hours of a successful hit, Soviets manning SAMs would be killed, and possibly those in the vicinity of the missiles as well, with the missiles being destroyed. That would almost surely set invasion in motion, and eventually the capture or killing of the rest of the troops he had sent, along with occupation of the Cubans he had set out to defend.

From the moment I realized in 1964 that Khrushchev had no control over the Cuban shooting and could no longer count on control of his own SAMs (or by extension, his missile units), I felt I understood sufficiently his quick announcement Sunday morning that he was accepting American terms, more than a day before RFK’s ultimatum had expired. He was otherwise about to lose his SAMs and missiles and many Soviet troops, with no prospect of achieving any compensatory benefits anywhere else except at even greater risk.

But almost thirty years later, the pressure on Khrushchev to act fast was revealed to have been enormously greater than that. There’s no indication that it occurred to him, either then or earlier, that he could forestall an invasion of Cuba—even, if necessary, after the momentum toward it had already been enhanced by an air attack on the SAMs and missiles—by revealing convincingly the presence of his combat units and their missiles, with warheads.

It would have been safer, of course, to do this earlier, perhaps even by revealing a large number of troops in field gear and the weapons in question to the unarmed American reconnaissance, before taking them against out of sight. But something like that, by arrangement that promised that no attack would accompany the observation, might have been offered even as ships were gathering for the assault. That might not have given pause to the Joint Chiefs, amazingly enough, but it would have been virtually certain to lead President Kennedy to cancel the invasion.

Even if that course of events seems improbable, it would have made sense to try it. *Better that than to do what Khrushchev and his commanders in Moscow and Havana were evidently actually planning* as the alternative to a quick withdrawal of the

missiles: to reveal the presence of the tactical weapons only by firing nuclear warheads at the invasion fleet and the assaulting troops, and of the large-scale Soviet ground forces by their engaging the surviving invaders.

But none of the Soviets seem to have thought of that. Nor the Cubans; Castro expected an invasion, expected the tactical nuclear weapons to be fired, and expecting the inhabitants of Cuba to vanish, as a result, from the face of the earth. His response to these expectations was to urge Khrushchev—not to offer concessions to the Americans, nor to reveal the presence of tactical nuclear weapons and Soviet troops, but—to launch a preemptive nuclear first strike against the U.S. as soon as the invasion began, in Castro's belief that thereby world socialism would survive and triumph, though Cuba would not. This particular suggestion from his ally helped bring home to Khrushchev—who believed at that moment that his SAM commander at Banes that morning had somehow been induced by Castro to fire at the U-2—that his MRBMs should no longer, not even for a ^{most likely} day, be left in the neighborhood of Castro and his quarter of a million troops and militia, even though they were operated by Soviets.

He had to start getting the missiles out very fast, *that morning*, because otherwise he was not merely likely to lose them but *to see the world blown up*.¹ What was coming was the invasion warned of since September and prepared for a year, alerted and “cocked” for two weeks—all this done in ignorance of what these forces would be meeting in the waters off Cuba and on the beaches—which would trigger a two-sided nuclear exchange that would almost certainly expand to a massive U.S. nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev and Kennedy had been trading references all week to the risks of destroying civilization and mankind. Now Khrushchev knew that (thanks to choices he himself had made, and kept secret from Kennedy) exactly that outcome might be just hours away. Of the two, only he knew that, and only he could prevent it. He had no real choice, and he had no time to lose.

He couldn't afford to let his acceptance message—drafted with the Presidium members at his dacha outside Moscow—take six hours or more to be coded, transmitted (by Western Union! With a bicycle-rider carrying it to the Soviet Embassy in Washington!) decoded and sent to the White House. (The hotline teletype between Moscow and the Pentagon was an outcome of this experience).

It was sent by car to Moscow—with the members of the Presidium hoping (perhaps some secretly praying) that there would be no obstacle or accident on the way—and delivered to Radio Moscow, whose manager was waiting on the steps to snatch it

¹ (Neither I nor any other American knew ^{this} the basis for his perspective on that for almost thirty years after the crisis, until revelation and eventual confirmation by Soviets of the presence of warheads, tactical nuclear weapons and Soviet combat units; and very oddly, no one else seems to have connected all the dots since then.)

and run it upstairs to the studio. (This scene was described to me by Fyodor Burlatsky, Khrushchev's speech-writer, who was present). No time, as usual, to rehearse the delivery of an official statement. As paragraph by paragraph was translated, it was handed to the announcer to be read over the air in English.

NO { Over Cuba, a flight of recon planes, accompanied by heavily armed escort planes, had already passed at low altitude at first light. Their photos confirmed what the public message announced: that the MRBMs were already being dismantled.

END NOTES

ⁱ It was Thursday morning in DC that Walter Lippmann made that suggestion for resolving the crisis, in a column that Khrushchev read as inspired by the White House. (I would guess that it was, at least indirectly, especially in light of Dobrynin's revelation above in 1990.) The belief for over a quarter of a century that Lippmann had been a trouble-maker in raising this possibility reflected the official story that JFK had already, and throughout the crisis, summarily rejected the possibility of a trade. But that account was false, as every member of the ExComm knew (but didn't reveal), even though none but the brothers knew of the meeting reported by Dobrynin.

ⁱⁱ The different style of this letter, as well as its apparently more demanding content, was greatly puzzling to the ExComm. It was much more formal and looked like a committee product, in contrast to the very personal tone of the message received the night before. Most readers thought it had been composed by a different agent: forced upon Khrushchev, though sent in his name, by a "hardline faction of the Presidium." They imagined there might even have been a coup, with Khrushchev sidelined.

Actually, both had been dictated by Khrushchev in the presence of the Presidium and each represented his own view of what should be sent. The one that arrived Saturday, written earlier and composed less urgently, had simply gone through more editing by staff.

Moreover, the two were not really contradictory, as they were read in Washington (and in almost all later scholarly discussion). In the message that was sent and arrived Friday night, Khrushchev had dropped out any reference to the Turkish missiles, but he hadn't actually promised to remove his missiles with no more concession by the Americans than a no-invasion pledge.

He had simply said that with such a guarantee, the "need" for missiles (weapons "you call offensive") would have disappeared. That could be read as a necessary condition for a deal, not a sufficient basis. He did *not* say (as Kennedy asserted he had said in his artful reply the next day) "We will remove them—under UN supervision—if the US guarantees it will not invade."

(Kennedy in his message on Saturday was deliberately reading into Khrushchev's letter what Alexander Feklisov, the KGB chief in Washington, had suggested to John Scali the day before, a proposal that was not in Khrushchev's letter. No one in Washington knew, or felt confident, that Feklisov was really speaking for Khrushchev: though in fact he was (as revealed by Sergei Khrushchev many years later). Rusk and others who knew of the Feklisov-Scali conversation read the Friday

night letter in hope that it was proposing the same deal. But it didn't actually make any contractual promise at all, as McNamara pointed out Friday night.)

Read more closely, the Friday night message could mean, "If you promise not to invade, then we can negotiate terms for withdrawing our missiles, which no longer be needed." After all, TASS and other Soviet statements earlier had asserted that the Soviet Union had "no need" to put missiles in Cuba, which could be said to be true; nevertheless, they did put them there. Likewise, it could well be argued that there was "no need" for US missiles to be in Turkey; most members of the ExComm could have agreed with that! It didn't mean the US was prepared to withdraw them, in the midst of a crisis, without some concession by the Soviets.

Thus, although very few analysts have ever noted this, and no one on the ExComm at the time, there was no formal contradiction at all between the two letters (though they were meant to suggest, and were read as suggesting, different deals, different resolutions of the crisis). Worried as he was on Friday that invasion was imminent, Khrushchev did not evidently mean in the letter he sent to preclude further bargaining—e.g., for the Turkish missiles—if he could get that postponed. Less worried Saturday morning, he started the bargaining (on terms he had arrived at—with the more or less automatic approval of the Presidium—the previous morning) without waiting for a reply to his previous message.

This was a subject of great confusion, and some alarm, in the ExComm (magnified by the difference in style and tone of the two messages, as much as by the apparent hardening. The second, after all, was a proposal they had anticipated almost from the beginning: somewhat mistakenly, since Khrushchev and the Presidium had never entertained the notion of a trade until it had been suggested by RFK, which was after the blockade. If anything, it asked for less than had been feared: no mention of IRBMs in Italy or England, of giving up Guantanamo (as Castro was shortly to demand), or Berlin. The shock effect came from its arriving after the Friday night message, which most of the ExComm had read wishfully.

The reason I go into this here is not simply to clarify the usual discussion, which Sergei Khrushchev essentially did in his memoirs, but to draw attention to Khrushchev's sensitivity to incoming indications of the imminence of invasion in his negotiating behavior. He definitely wanted to avert an invasion: but any reduction in his sense of its imminence, as he experienced Saturday morning, inclined him to use the additional hours for more bargaining for better terms of his withdrawal. That's a basis for my inference that the forty-eight hours that RFK "offered" Saturday night—or even the twenty-four hours before a decision was "requested"—would have encouraged him to postpone accepting the JFK/RFK demand while he continued to press for the public trade proposed in his latest message, which JFK's letter had ignored rather than answered. (RFK had rejected it, while offering the covert trade. That concession, though worthless to Khrushchev, could have encouraged him to continue, for twelve hours or more (considering the time

differences between Moscow and DC) to bargain for the public trade, a “small” concession that would have made all the difference between victory or defeat for either side. I believe—in part, precisely by his behavior on Saturday morning (in Moscow), after a worried Friday—that he would have done that if the 24/48-hour ultimatum had not been accompanied by a separate, more urgent threat (see below).

ⁱⁱⁱ My inference here reflects Rusk’s revelation in 1987 that Kennedy on Saturday night—secretly from all other members of the ExComm, perhaps even his brother--that an intermediary prepare immediately to urge, on Kennedy’s further order, U Thant to propose a public trade which Kennedy would agree to. He had been argued out of accepting it immediately on Saturday by McGeorge Bundy and others.

^{iv} See above end-note. It implies that, probably unknown to his brother during his lifetime, the President had *another* basis for hope—in fact, probably confidence—that military conflict could be avoided, and the missiles removed from Cuba, in a way other than by Khrushchev’s accepting RFK’s proposal of a private trade of the Turkish missiles plus a no-invasion pledge.

He had at least prepared the possibility of accepting Khrushchev’s latest proposal of a public trade of the missiles, presented as a request by the UN secretary general U Thant. My strong guess from all the evidence is that he definitely intended to set this in motion if Khrushchev had not, contrary to Kennedy’s expectations, accepted the private offer from his brother within the twenty-four hour deadline.

That would, among other things, correspond to what Dave Powers told Mimi Alford, Kennedy’s mistress, in describing the brothers’ conversation immediately afterwards (she had been concealed in the next room while Bobby was there), that the President was not nearly as pessimistic as RFK.

You cannot talk like sane men around a peace table while the atomic bomb itself is ticking beneath it. Do not treat the atomic bomb as a weapon of offense; do not treat it as an instrument of the police. Treat the bomb for what it is: the visible insanity of a civilization that has ceased...to obey the laws of life." - Lewis Mumford, 1946